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Written in Blood

The M1-series tank is designed to kill. It is an equal opportunity killer that doesn't distinguish between friend and foe or between training and combat. This tank can be your best friend if you take care of it and follow its rules. If you don't, it can be your worst enemy. Since 1990, we've had 14 non-combat fatalities and two permanent disabilities that are directly attributable to the tank. The majority of these accidents were caused by crewmen not paying attention to what they were doing, such as drivers being caught by the turret or by a failure to adhere to standards, such as not using the gun travel lock.

Every time we have a fatal or crippling accident, we re-evaluate the warnings, standards, procedures, and mechanical interlocks to see if changes could prevent a similar accident. The number of mechanical interlocks and safety features seem to increase daily. We've all seen the numerous safety warnings in the technical manuals. They are not put there to slow you down or make your work harder. Unfortunately, most of them have been put in place because someone was hurt or died; they're "Written in Blood."

This past September, we lost a tank commander in a breech accident. It appears that the accident was caused by the failure to engage any of the four existing mechanical interlocks, any single one of which, if engaged, would have prevented breech movement. The tank commander failed to follow normal safety procedures highlighted in the tank -10 manual and reinforced repeatedly in training. Bypassing safety interlocks or ignoring standards in a tank can mean death or serious injury. The tank is not forgiving and it doesn't give you a second chance. Recently, a mechanic was permanently disabled in a breech accident because the standards and procedures were also ignored.

Webster's Dictionary defines an accident as "an unforeseen and unplanned event or circumstance" or as "an unfortunate event resulting especially from carelessness or ignorance." About 80 percent of Army accidents, both in peacetime and combat, involve human error. Often accidents cause more losses in soldiers and equipment than the enemy does. All accidents are preventable. We must focus on doing the job correctly, safely, and by the book. We must use safety devices and pay attention to warnings. We must provide leadership that focuses on proper safety control measures and train our subordinates to do the same.

Today's NCO is the front-line trainer and role model for our soldiers and the motivating force to eliminate accident losses. Each hour of each day, an NCO somewhere in the world enforces a standard, provides leadership, and instills the discipline that may prevent a future accident. If the NCO refuses to follow the standards or tells his crew, "Just do as I say, not as I do," he fails in his duty as a leader and more importantly, he fails his crewmembers. Doing something the right way has got to become second nature; that is why we must "train like we fight." We must train correctly and follow the safety procedures outlined in the -10 technical manuals. We must train safety procedures to become second nature and habitual, so whether in a high-stress situation or in the comfort of our own motor pool, we will still operate safely. However, if we ignore the safety features and warnings when we train, we will continue to lose more soldiers to accidents.

Leaders must train and set examples for their soldiers and must always adhere to the standards. According to the U.S. Army Safety Center, there is a dangerous trend appearing. The most common violators that we see from accident investigations are sergeants, staff sergeants, and young officers. For example, in June 2000, during tank gunnery, a lieutenant allowed his driver to drive the tank in an unsafe manner, "power-sliding" around a concrete turn pad. The NCOIC of the range spoke with the lieutenant about the driver's recklessness and the fact that the lieutenant needed to keep himself at nametag defilade while acting as a tank commander.

The following day, the lieutenant failed to heed the warning of the NCOIC, and his driver once again attempted to power-slide around the turn pad. Unfortunately, the tank slid on some loose gravel, left the road, and rolled 360 degrees. The lieutenant was not at nametag defilade and the tank crushed him as it rolled. What could have prevented this accident? What would a good leader have done? What should the crew have done?

A common phrase that has stood for many years has been "soldiers will focus only on what the commander checks." Given this, commanders must demonstrate the knowledge for all safety requirements inherent to their

Continued on Page 14

COMMANDER'S HATCH from Page 5

command and be tenacious in checking and rechecking for compliance. They must ensure their subordinate leaders possess this same trait. If leaders focus on a safe working environment, everyone will. We must emphasize that safety is everyone's responsibility. Safety isn't just following rules; it is knowing where you are and what you're doing at all times. This is situational awareness (SA) and it's everyone's responsibility. SA is not just understanding where you are on the battlefield; it is understanding where you are in the tank and what you are doing. It is knowing where the breech is and where your body is in reference to the breech; it is knowing where all your crewmembers are when you move the turret. Situational awareness is everyone's business.

Safety has always been a number one priority in any training event or exercise because the most valuable asset in our Army is the soldier. In the early days of World War II as our nation prepared for the biggest military challenge in its history, General George C. Marshall, Army Chief of Staff, said, "The primary instrument of warfare is the fighting man. All of the weapons with which we arm him are merely tools to enable him to carry out his mission." This still holds true today. We must continue to find ways to protect our most valuable asset. I challenge each of you to set the example that reinforces the standard, provide leadership and instill discipline that may prevent future accidents to protect our most valuable asset — our soldiers.

The U.S. Army, the Armor Association, the Patton Museum, *ARMOR* Magazine, and "tankers" and cavalrymen everywhere lost a good friend and stalwart supporter recently when MG (Ret.) Stan Sheridan passed away. Few devoted as much time and effort supporting the Armored Force as this mounted warrior. He served his country in uniform in war and peace for over 32 years, and then kept on serving for 18 years as Director of the U.S. Cavalry Association, Vice President of the U.S. Armor Association, Board of Trustee member of the Patton Museum, Honorary Colonel of the 69th Armor Regiment, and Gold Medallion holder in the Order of Saint George. These are just some of the titles and honors earned by Stan Sheridan. You know it's easy to support the Armored Force while one wears the uniform; it's a form of self-preservation. But General Sheridan, and others like him, who did it and do it while retired, are special men indeed. These men work tirelessly to keep our heritage alive, passing it along to new generations of tankers and cavalrymen. They remember and celebrate fallen comrades and their accomplishments while mentoring and supporting the "new breed." They deserve our gratitude and respect — there are too few of this ilk.

FORGE THE THUNDERBOLT!

(Editor's Note: CSM Carl Christian also contributed to this column.)